

9-1996

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Recommended Citation

Lowe, B., Language and context: Some problems of teaching journalism in second language, *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 1, 1996, 76-83.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss1/8>

Language and Context: Some Problems Of Teaching Journalism In Second Language

Despite an international perception that Hong Kong is a bilingual society, the use of English - and English speaking fluency - is confined to a few elite realms of economic, political and cultural activity. Students rarely use English outside the classroom. In learning journalism in English students are greatly disadvantaged by their lack of familiarity with different English-language genres. Difficulties in comprehending spoken English in a context other than the classroom tend to hamper the students' acquisition of effective reporting and interviewing skills. The author attempted to overcome these problems with two different strategies: by utilising video technology and by taking his classes out of the classroom.

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Journalism is a craft that uses language as its tools. It involves a close embrace with the linguistic medium of its transactions and its output. Journalists use refined language skills to gather information and convert that information into a marketable product. Their ability to use language for these tasks usually requires a deep and life-long immersion in the language of their professional context. In monolingual communities the second language speaking journalist has a difficult task competing with native speakers on their own linguistic turf.

Hong Kong students studying journalism in English are doubly disadvantaged by their lack of familiarity with English and by its role as a prestige language in a society that mostly speaks another tongue. English is used in a narrow range of contexts in Hong Kong: in elite domains of international business; as the language of colonial government; among the expatriates who play key roles in the political, economic and cultural life of the territory; and in the classroom where hundreds of thousands of primary to tertiary students labour under archaic methods of teaching that emphasise grammatical rules and rote learning of set texts. English is not used in the street, in the media or in the home of the average Hong Konger. It is a foreign language.

Teaching journalism in this environment has some major problems, the chief one of which is getting students to understand

that working as a journalist means functioning in a language as well as just producing written examples of that language. Apart from producing journalistic texts, it means going out into various official and public contexts - news conferences, law courts, legislatures, opening ceremonies, etc. - and listening to English discourse in those contexts, then asking questions framed by the linguistic conventions of those contexts. This amounts to a quantum leap from the narrow context of the classroom, which is almost the limit of the students' relationship with the English language up until the time they start the journalism program.

This particular problem the students had with listening in different contexts was brought home to me when, early in the course, I took my journalism class to one of Hong Kong's busiest criminal courts to introduce them to court reporting. The trial I selected was in its final stages with the magistrate about to deliver his verdict on seven men charged with extortion and drug offenses. It had all the hallmarks of a classic Hong Kong criminal case.

The defendants were accused of being members of the *Wo Hop Lo* triad, one of the notorious organised criminal gangs that penetrate and plunder thousands of Hong Kong businesses. Their arrests followed an elaborate police undercover operation. A further twist to the trial was the defense's partly-successful attempt to have the police evidence disallowed because the depositions of the two key police witnesses were suspiciously identical.

The problem became evident as soon as we left the courtroom after the magistrate had delivered his verdict. My students were in a panic. "We didn't understand a word," they complained. "We can't write the story for you. We just didn't get any of it." I was stunned. In all the years I'd spent in court rooms during my news reporting career I'd never come across a magistrate who spoke so plainly and clearly, avoiding most of the arcane, multi-syllabic jargon of legal discourse. He was a reporter's dream. But still my students hadn't been able to comprehend him.

They had simply failed to listen to him. Not that they hadn't tried. They heard him speak but they weren't able to listen to the meaning of his words. All my classroom lessons on reporting skills would be wasted, I realised, unless my students could apply those skills to real life situations in which they listened to verbal exchanges and monologues and interpreted those speech events to shape them into reports for a public audience.

This problem of comprehending and interpreting different listening contexts is not unique to second language learners. In fact journalism education in all societies involves extensive programs of exposing and familiarising learners with unfamiliar listening contexts, such as courtrooms and legislatures. These programs can be either part of a formal education process -

university journalism courses - or as informal learning-on-the-job programs for new recruits to journalism.

Working journalists require a broad knowledge of the institutions that operate in their societies and need to be able to understand the discourse of those institutions in their many different environments. In fact one of a journalist's most important attributes is being able to operate in different environments, to be able to switch attention from one context to another. Acquiring this skill is more difficult for learners operating in a second language because their exposure to the use of that language in different contexts is much more limited.

Hong Kong students rarely listen to English outside the classroom. They deal with English in a narrow range of textbook and lecture frames. The solution I decided to try was to structure my teaching program around different contexts, reducing the largely counter-productive influence of the classroom context; shifting the frame so that the students would become familiar with real life English language contexts.

A second problem I encountered among my journalism students was their difficulty in producing story lines in English. Up until they began the journalism course the only English writing they had done was essay texts for school assignments. They had learnt just one very specialised style of presenting mostly textbook derived information, and virtually nothing else. They found it difficult to adapt to the demands of the journalism text for a narrative structure based on a hierarchy of facts.

Their initial attempts to produce journalistic texts foundered on the rocks of their very narrow experience with written English genres. This produced an acute lack of confidence. They had little understanding of how to tell a story in English. They hardly ever read news stories in English, and the only English fiction they had been exposed to had been presented as English reading class texts.

For this problem I decided to introduce a teaching device that would encourage them to focus on the core elements of story telling: content and narrative. That device was the video camera which introduced a new frame for the students to examine their problems in developing narrative skills.

Some of the literature on second language acquisition provided clues to the nature of the listening-in-context problem my students were up against. Anderson and Lynch (1988), for instance, had pinpointed one aspect of the problem in the difference between first language acquisition and the learning of a second language.

Literature Survey

Children learning how to communicate in their first language go through a silent period when they don't have to talk - they just listen. By the time they start talking they are already familiar with more words than they can say.

Second language learners do not have the benefit of this silent incubation period. Listening to and learning to speak the new language happens simultaneously. They need to focus on learning how to speak right from the start.

Listening becomes subservient to that goal. Another aspect of language acquisition is that pre-verbal children learn - particularly during play activities - to receive information in a contextualised setting that has strong elements of predictability. They learn that certain verbal information relates to a specific context and that they can predict similar patterns of information will be generated in similar contexts. In other words, they learn that listening can be supplemented by the nonverbal cues provided by the context.

Richards (1983) produced a comprehensive outline of the cognitive skills involved in listening comprehension. These involved three connected levels of discourse processing: propositional identification, interpretation of elocutionary force (the effect a speech act is meant to have on its listener) and activation of real world knowledge. Real world knowledge - combined with syntactic knowledge of the language spoken - is what the listener uses to determine the propositions expressed by a speech event. Inferencing and interpreting play crucial roles in listening comprehension. The listener's ability to make these inferences and interpretations depends on prior knowledge of the particular situations, goals, participants and procedures associated with specific speech acts.

Tauroza (1987, 1988) discussed specific listening problems observed in Hong Kong English learners. He found there was a tendency among Hong Kong English teachers to treat listening as an entirely receptive skill: listeners just had to recognise the words to understand the message. These teachers chose to focus on the "ear" skills of listening, i.e. perception, rather than the "brain" skills, i.e. comprehension. The teachers emphasised dictation listen-and-repeat exercises and taught their students to recognise words rather than interpret them, ignoring the fact that listening comprehension is largely influenced by who is talking and why.

This approach took advantage of the second language learner's natural tendency to focus on the sounds of the new language. In fact the classroom English they were immersed in gave them a false idea of what English really sounded like.

Bilbow (1989) observed that problems with listening comprehension among second language learners could be linked

to fundamental aspects of the approach to learning: an emphasis on surface learning, or learning as a matter of accumulating knowledge, rather than deep learning or learning as a process of changing one's view of reality. Surface learning was fostered by a reliance on rote memorisation and text-based study, a common feature of English language teaching in Hong Kong secondary schools. From these methods students learnt to depend on "bottom-up" processing of data-driven processing of information. They were not encouraged to adopt the preferable "top-down" approach to processing information. In top-down processing the listener relies on prior knowledge, expectations, frames, schemata and macro structures to predict and infer information from a speech event.

Methodology

I wanted to provide my students another communicative vehicle to bridge the gap between the language they used in normal social interaction (Cantonese) and the language they had to deal with in the context of their journalism education. This extra communicative medium should be linguistically neutral, it should provide a separate frame for the students to learn in and it should mask the context of the classroom by creating its own learning environment.

Enter the video camera, which came to play a central role in my journalism program. The technique works like this: with a fellow student operating the camera, the subject is asked to tell a story on a chosen topic - a good starter is his or her life story or their family history - directly to the camera. The subject then views the videotaped narrative on a monitor and is able to assess and self-criticise his or her performance in terms of the information content of the narrative, the logical sequencing of that information and the fluency of the delivery. Subsequent attempts at the same exercise allow the subject to make improvements and refine his or her technique. The subject can also experiment with improvements by manipulating the videotape in an editing machine.

Although the subjects are more focused on the performance side of the exercise, their ability to construct narratives is greatly enhanced by the concentration this focus on performance produces. The technology of the video camera, the monitor and the editing deck creates another context for the students which "removes" them symbolically from the context of the classroom. The application of video technology creates an interactive environment in which students respond affirmatively to the frame of the video camera, overcoming their hesitancy and lack of confidence in using spoken English.

Constructing and telling stories is a journalist's essential role. The video camera gave my students a motivation to develop this skill that I couldn't have provided them with lessons and examples.

More importantly, it enabled them to understand what I was trying to teach them. When they saw their performance played back to them on the monitor (the bigger the monitor the better) they recognised that performance as an attempt to construct and tell a story and they were able to assess the effectiveness of that attempt. In other words the penny dropped for them on one of the most important aspects of what they needed to learn to become journalists.

Young people in Hong Kong have a strong affinity with technology, perhaps more so than in many other youth cultures, and this may have been in factor in their enthusiasm for the introduction of video cameras in the class room. Nevertheless, the results were encouraging. Students appeared to be more focused on the task of telling the story than they were when I had asked them to give a verbal report on a story theme or when they had been asked to write a story.

The important point that I established was that there was a way of telling stories. Students understood this to the extent that they could later apply it to their writing by "telling" the story to themselves before putting finger to keyboard. The video camera exercises had taught them the organising and structuring of facts and events that was required for a successful performance was also required to produce a successful piece of writing.

It was a point I often reminded them of whenever they became stuck on a story during a writing exercise. "How would you tell the story to someone face-to-face?" I would ask them. Nine times out of ten it was the prompt they needed to get their story into a form they could commit to writing. This might seem very basic stuff for students being taught in their native language, but for second language students, it is fundamentally important to learn a technique for structuring thoughts into sequences suitable for specific writing genres.

The second of my students' problems - their unfamiliarity with discourse context outside the classroom - I tackled by getting them, as much as possible, out of the classroom and into the world. I took my students off campus to anywhere that I could think of that was relevant to the program. When we were looking at environmental reporting we went to the Mai Po Marshes, a wet land reserve in Hong Kong and one of the territory's last remaining wildlife sanctuaries. When we were doing interviewing techniques we went out into the markets and badgered stall-holders and shoppers. When we were doing descriptive writing we took a boat out to one of the outer islands and wrote the scene

with our notebooks on our knees as the boat bucked through the swell. When we were learning the multi-sourced story we took a train to China and stayed a couple of days.

I also sought to change the applied context. This meant rethinking the events and situations that we could use as models for practising reporting and writing techniques and choosing those that would engage the students more. Court cases were put on the back burner. I found a lot of the students were interested in the fashion scene - which has a big public following in Hong Kong - so we started to talk to designers and go to fashion shows and write fashion stories. Our assignments catered to the students' sporting interests, their hobbies and the social issues that concerned them, like unemployment and diminishing job prospects for graduates.

Conclusion

Teaching a language-intensive craft like journalism to second language speakers requires an initial recognition that their contact with that second language - the language they have to learn to operate in - probably hasn't provided them with the linguistic foundation they need to learn the necessary skills. Strategies are needed to create an awareness of the way language is used in different public contexts.

The video camera produced results with the Hong Kong students because it gave them a window on their own language problems and offered them a way of finding the solution. The camera made them realise that they shared the instinctive human capacity for turning knowledge and experience into narrative. They just needed to refocus their approach to using English for them to be able to tell their stories confidently and competently.

An emphasis on getting out of the classroom and into the field encouraged the students to develop an awareness of the different contexts of journalism and how they needed to be familiar with the linguistic and communication conventions of those contexts. They came to recognise that their exposure to English usage had, up till then, been narrow and restricted, and that they needed to learn how to listen to English in its many modes of public discourse.

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